

VIEWPOINT: Why Should Anyone Care?

Author: [Slavenka Drakulic](#)

For years people in the Balkans complained that the West didn't pay enough attention to their problems. Now a well-ordered court in a well-ordered town has been established for them - and they don't like it.

It is eleven o'clock on a bright sunny Sunday morning in The Hague. My street is still asleep, and I see no signs of life in the almost identical rows of houses on either side. I feel as if I have awoken in the midst of a fairy tale.

As I stand there, I remember one of the first tales I heard as a child, "Hansel and Gretel". The brother and the sister get lost in the woods and suddenly find themselves - famished - in front of a pretty little house. To their surprise, the house is built of chocolate - I guess because we did not have ginger bread in Yugoslavia . . .

Now I am here, in a street with rows of two- or three-storey houses as if built of chocolate, with funny facades pointed at the top and windows and doors painted white, like whipped cream.

Everything seems perfect. On the pavements, no rubbish - no Coke cans, no plastic bottles, not even any cigarette butts. Around the corner, the houses continue, now with small gardens in front - so tiny, they look like doll gardens. But each is very tidy, with a patch of perfectly cut grass and real trees and bushes.

At a street stand, a man is setting out vegetables: bright yellow, red and green peppers, young carrots all of the same length, sorted in rows like small soldiers, light red tomatoes and strawberries, deep indigo eggplants and light green lettuce heads. They don't have a bit of soil on them, all clean and shiny and of the same size -- so perfect they seem artificial. Same with the vases of flowers - tulips in all colours, gardenias, roses big and small - also artificial in their beauty. I have to touch them to see if they are real: they are indeed.

So this is a fairy tale town of perfect houses, perfect vegetables, perfect flowers. And the people - hard working Protestants who stole their land from the sea and literally created their country - are now resting. In such a town, people have the right to sleep late on Sundays and then drink coffee, read newspapers, go for a walk on the long sandy beaches of Scheveningen - live a normal life, not bothering about the rest of the world's troubles. They deserve it all because they made such a life possible for themselves.

It's very different for my part of world, the Balkans, and the life we made for ourselves. Ours is not neat and clean and orderly - certainly no fairy tale. I am not sure if we have the same right to rest - or to close our eyes to the misery around us.

I reflect on this as I approach the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. An elderly lady with a straw hat pedals her bicycle. She drives slowly, elegantly, sitting erect on her seat. I am sure she knows about the war crimes tribunal, and I wonder, what does she think about it? Then, as she passes, another question occurs: why should she think about it? Why should she care about us at all?

Or people in Berlin or Stockholm or in Paris: why should anyone for that matter care for our past and present wars, our war criminals, our poverty -- the whole mess down there in the Balkans?

Ten years ago, I described these people - Westerners, Europeans - as indifferent to our suffering. I was furious at them. Now I ask myself, Are they not tired of us? Have they not done enough? Besides, the

situation has completely changed. We don't want foreigners to care about us any longer. They can help us build roads and houses, but not democracy. Before we wanted to be helped; now we don't want to be patronised. We can do it ourselves, thank you very much!

Our Croatian or Bosnian or Serbian governments would like to run their little states by themselves, even the Kosovo Liberation Army prefers to run its little wars by itself. And we are especially allergic to the pressures to deliver war criminals to The Hague. Now, our wars - and our criminals - should be our own business.

But it is too late to close a door to Europe that we so pathetically prised open. As I walk around this chocolate town I am bothered by my memory. I remember what we did ten years ago when the war started in Croatia and then in Bosnia. We begged these Westerners, Europeans, the non-existent "international community", the "world" in general - we begged them to care for us. We wanted to break their complacency, to shake them out of their own placid fantasies. We shouted at them and cursed at them and we cried. We explained, "We are Europeans, too!"

In short, we did everything just to get their attention and their help. For years, we were angry and sad that they turned their heads away from our wars, not sure if the Balkans belonged to their culture, if Croatia could be part of the West, if Bosnian Muslims could be Europeans . . .

It was especially upsetting that they defended themselves by saying, "We don't understand". It took Vukovar, Sarajevo and Srebrenica to make them understand what these wars were about. But it was not until the bombardment of Serbia in 1999 that the Balkans were really acknowledged as a part of Europe. Paradoxically, we were integrated into Europe by NATO. With the bombing, the long cry for help from all the victims of Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia was finally fulfilled.

This is all forgotten now. Now, after they have spent so many millions in humanitarian aid, in sustaining their armies there, in donations and investments, we want the same people - these Westerners, these Europeans - to stop taking an interest in our "internal affairs".

But nothing is an "internal affair" any more, nor can it be while ethnic cleansing and genocide is in question.

Meantime, the attitude towards the Balkans has changed. After all that begging and pleading, the little old lady has now learned to look on the map of Europe and find Bosnia and Kosovo and Macedonia. It took her some time, but the lesson is now learned. After years of being reproached that she doesn't care, she began to care. Not only in humanitarian terms, by collecting medicines and blankets, but also morally and politically. She can no longer sit in front of a TV set and watch atrocities or injustices with indifference. Isn't that, after all, what we in the Balkans wanted?

One of the results of this change is the war crimes court in The Hague. But we cannot go back. After demanding attention to our misery for so long, it is no longer possible to say to the millions of people, "Why do you care about our war crimes? They are our problem, and anyway, you don't understand". Of course, their understanding is imperfect. But they do remember Srebrenica and they believe that culprits should be punished. And if this doesn't happen, they ask, Why not? They have the right to ask: we gave them that right when we appealed to their moral values, their conscience, their humanity. No wonder they respond with justice, and a belief in democratic states based on the rule of law. No wonder where these qualities are lacking, they try to help.

The point is that the people of the Balkans, with their own irresponsible behaviour, created the need for the tribunal. I am referring not only to governments - and the atrocities for which they are responsible -- but to citizens as well, who did not raise their voices to oppose the crimes or call on them to be investigated. Because of all this, because of our own incapacity, the tribunal is our child. States that show no interest in

prosecuting their criminals deserve no respect for their so-called internal affairs - especially after begging for help for years.

So we, people from the Balkans, should be grateful to this "world" for refusing to let us drown in our own dirt. We should be grateful to the old ladies like the one in The Hague who, amid their flowers and vegetables and quiet, ordered streets, are still concerned about us.

Or do we seriously believe that our soldiers committed no crimes? That is another fairy tale . . .

Slavenka Drakulic is an IWPR special correspondent focusing on justice and war crimes. Her most recent novel, about mass rape in Bosnia, "As If I Am Not There", is published by Abacus.

Location: Balkans
Macedonia
Albania
Serbia

Focus: International Criminal Tribunal for the former
Yugoslavia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/viewpoint-why-should-anyone-care>